Refiguring Personal Narrative as a Path to Leadership: A Global Perspective

By Susan Hagadorn and Gail Rae

A KEY CHALLENGE FACING LEADERS IS THE NEED TO RECONCILE human differences with human interdependence (Lipman-Bluman, 1996, p. 1). In order to bring out common ground among constituents with diverse interests, leaders are charged with exposing collective voices, which may pave the way toward shared action. As Peter Senge (1990, pp. 11–13) points out, the "myth of the hero-leader," who single-handedly transforms the organization, is no longer relevant. Instead, leaders must take care in how they use authority and influence to promote commitment rather than enforce compliance. According to Goleman (1995, pp. 26–27), this connective orientation to leadership requires self-knowledge, self-management, and awareness of others.

These challenges bring story to the center of leadership practice as a means to cultivate self-understanding and foster group synergy. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1977, p. 3) describes culture as "the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves." In organizations and communities, stories play a role in passing down tradition, preserving group cohesion, and socializing new members (Habermas, 1988, p. 142).

Narratives reveal the history, assumptions, values, biases, hopes, fears, and expectations that hold potential to foster mutual understanding and cooperation but often serve to hold people apart (Ricoeur, 1983, pp. 52–55). Understanding and telling "my" story is a process of self-awareness that serves as a foundation for recognizing "your" story and co-creating "our" story.

This paper describes the application of personal narrative as a medium for understanding the stories that frame a leader's commitments and action and explores how refiguring personal narrative supports deep learning and change. It tells the story of a former child soldier who became an award-winning human rights leader to illustrate the power of narrative to create self-awareness, refigure identity, and foster collective action. It draws from this story implications for leadership development.

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Story as a Foundation for Collective Life

According to Paul Ricoeur (1983, p. 52), the capacity to understand and tell a life as a story, and to remember the past and project toward the future, is part of what it is to be human. Stories make sense out of the disparate events of life, creating concordance and meaning in the face of change (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 147).

Human narrative is experienced through the lens of a three-fold present made up of a past-present, future-present, and present-present. Past and future are never experienced as fact but through an interpretation of them from where one is situated in the present (Ricoeur, 1983, p. 21). As a result, humans have the capacity to assign new meanings to the past and imagine multiple possibilities for the future. This opens the door to regard life as a work of fiction, not in the pejorative sense of falsehood but in the ennobling sense that one can become the creative author of a life and, by extension, organizations and society.

The past-present includes memories in the form of history and traditions that frame values, assumptions, and biases. The future-present is a form of anticipation that encompasses hopes, fears, and expectations. Cognitive bridges are formed between what is remembered and what is anticipated, creating a sense of identity that leads to commitment and action in the present (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 114). When this occurs without reflection, there is a tendency to simply react to stimuli. Self-awareness, and a deepened awareness of others, emerges when memory and anticipation are raised to a level of consciousness that allows reflection, critique, and ethical discernment.

William Isaacs (1999) suggests that the concepts of human difference and separation are illusions. Following this line of thought, while the events contained in each story are unique, underlying them are shared human emotions of fear, pain, hope, and care. At this level of meaning, each story resonates with the stories of others,

leading to human connections. By creating opportunities for group members to share individual, organizational, and community stories, leaders pave the way for mutual commitment and collective action.

From Child Soldier to Human Rights Leader

The story of Arn Chorn-Pond is a compelling demonstration of the power of narrative refiguration. It illustrates how raising memories and anticipation of the future to a level of consciousness, and creating bridges from the past to the future, creates self-awareness that has the capacity to reframe identity and contribute to the development of a leader. It speaks to the need to engage in imagination in relationship with others to support change. Once a labor camp prisoner and child soldier, today Arn is an award-winning human rights leader.

Memories of the Past-Present

The Early Years

Arn was born to a family of opera performers in rural Cambodia. He remembers being a small child, the color of rice fields, the scent of jasmine, and the music that surrounded him. He recalls the love of an aunt who tended him and the little brother with whom he played.

In 1975 the Khmer Rouge, a communist guerilla force led by Pol Pot, seized control of the country, evacuated the cities, and forced the entire population into agrarian servitude. They began a four-year campaign of human and cultural genocide that left two million people dead. After they were evacuated from their home, Arn's family members disappeared, one by one, and he was imprisoned in a labor camp with 700 children. Fifty survived. Arn learned to play the flute for his captors, which he credits for saving his life. He was forced to watch mass killings and prohibited from showing any emotion.

When Vietnam invaded Cambodia in 1979, the Khmer Rouge took away Arn's flute, handed him a rifle, and forced him to the front lines to fight. He escaped to the jungle where, close to death, he was discovered by a group of women who took him to a refugee camp. There, an American relief worker, Peter Pond, decided to adopt him.

Lost and Found in the U.S.A.

Over the course of a few days, Arn was taken out of the Cambodian jungle and placed in a private school in New Hampshire, unable to understand the language spoken around him. He says, "I made a lot of mistakes . . . I was confused. I didn't know where my parents were. Why did I end up in America?" Arn was haunted by acts committed at gunpoint and experienced guilt that he had been given the opportunity for a new life.

He felt isolated and emotionally numb. Each morning, Peter went to him and said, "[w]hat you have done in Cambodia I know. But children are innocent. There is nothing wrong with you. You are a son of the Prince." In time, Arn joined Peter to imagine himself differently.

Refiguring the Narrative

Peter encouraged Arn to share his story to support his own healing and to let the world know what happened in Cambodia. His narrative resonated with others, opening him to their care, helping him imagine a different set of human relationships, and engaging others in his vision of Cambodia restored.

Arn became a spokesperson for Amnesty International. He founded Children of War, bringing together children from both sides of conflicts to share their stories and commit to peace. He worked to prevent violence among Southeast Asian gangs. Yet he remained adrift and returned to Cambodia, unsure what he was searching for.

Bridging Memory and Anticipation

In Cambodia, Arn learned about his family and his musical heritage. One day he encountered Chek Mach, a former opera diva, selling cigarettes and charcoal in an alley. Looking into her face, he remembered his mother, and committed to give her a better life. He saw children in the streets, thrown into a world of deprivation, reminding him of life in the labor camp. He promised to give them a share of happiness and a sense of their heritage. By drawing on his memories and bridging them with his hopes for the future, Arn gained a sense of mission and agency. Once confused and adrift, today Arn says, "I'm committed. I'm too clear about myself now."

Arn has refigured his past to promote peace through art. As founder and artistic director of Cambodian Living Arts, a program of World Education based in Boston, he works to rebuild the music, dance, and shadow puppetry of Cambodia's past. Arn finds old masters who survived the Khmer Rouge, provides them a comfortable living, and engages them to teach children their nearly extinct crafts. Arn teaches the children that before their lessons, they are to give respect to the masters. He says, "These kids know nothing but violence and being mistreated and begging on the street. . . . When they find something to respect, they respect themselves."

From Personal Story to Collective Action

Through his work with Southeast Asian gang members in the U.S., Arn became acquainted with three young men, Tony, Felix, and Sam. Arn says, "They were confused. . . . One of them thinks he is Spanish, one of them thinks he is Thai, and one of them doesn't know who he is." Arn took them to Cambodia, where they learned

about the history their parents had been unable to share with them. They visited the temples of Angkor Wat, where they began to understand their culture. They spent a day with children who live, work, and play on a garbage dump, engaging their imaginations to think about the actions they can take to contribute to a better world. With a new sense of purpose, they have formed the hip-hop musical group, Seasia. Accompanied by ancient Cambodian instruments, they sing about children hurt by war and disease and offer a message of hope and peace.

Drawing Meaning from the Story

Arn refers to the process of narrative refiguration that he and the young men of Seasia have accomplished, saying,

> If you don't have anything to hold onto, which is your identity, where you come from, then likely . . . you don't know where you're going. You just live and breathe, that's it. If you know where you come from, then you most likely know who you are, and then where you are going. These three things are very important in life.

Arn has reckoned with the past by drawing upon his memories of the time before the Khmer Rouge, and the nightmares of that era, to form a vision of what Cambodia might be. Together with a renewed understanding of his personal heritage, this vision of the future clarifies who he is and the actions he takes to bring his vision into being. By sharing his story with others, he draws on their perspectives to see his life differently, creates human connections, and fosters collective action to draw meaning from the past and move forward into the future.

Arn has refigured his narrative, in the process traversing the metaphor of victim and child soldier through Peter's image of him as a son of the Prince. Today he calls himself "Peacemaker."

Implications for Leadership Development

While Arn's story represents a radical case of refiguring a personal narrative toward leadership, it illustrates processes that are applicable in a range of leadership development contexts. Specifically, Arn's story demonstrates that

- We draw on examples from the past to imagine the future differently.
- When we understand the traditions and history that frame our values, beliefs, and assumptions—and the hopes, fears, and expectations that shape our view of the future—identity and commitments to action in the present are clarified.
- To the extent that each of us has imaginative capacities and blind spots, we need to refigure our stories in relationship with others—mentors, coaches, or friends—who can supplement our perspectives and sense of possibilities.

Discovering Your Story

Personal and social change require learning something new and leaving other things behind. In the process, there is often a reframing of the events from the past. John Kotre (1996, pp. 65–66) writes:

> From the cognitive point of view, the problem with a picture-perfect memory is that it cannot be cleaned out. The same may be true from an emotional standpoint. How often might we have wished to write down some feelings from the past and magically burn them away, only to find them still hovering within us! How often might we have tried to get rid of reminders that cause pain and regret! . . . With a perfect memory . . . we wouldn't be able to see the loss, the fear, the guilt, and the waste in a new light. We'd be frozen in the past, unable to repair it, unable to breathe, change or grow.

The development of a leadership story makes use of this process, giving rise to new interpretations of memory.

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There are many ways to begin the reframing process to explore your current leadership story and choose, if you like, to change it for the better. Some questions that may guide your storytelling include:

- What stories from the past influence my life/my work today?
- What are my hopes, dreams, fears, and expectations for the future?
- In what ways am I a leader?
- What role (hero, victim, observer) do I play in the story?
- How do the stories that move me most influence me as a leader?
- What values, assumptions, and biases do my stories reveal?

Write or speak your story into a recorder. You may wish to begin with the words, "Once upon a time," evoking as they do a sense of security and emotion. Continue until you feel you have reached the endpoint and resist the temptation to edit or interpret your thoughts. Stories have the ability to convey complex experiences with multiple levels of meaning, endowing them with the capacity to resonate with others. By committing a story to paper or audiotape, the learner creates distance from the story, allowing it to be reread for additional meaning.

Interpreting Your Story

Stories represent a verbal interpretation of the self at one moment in time in an ever-changing world. Leaders engage in a process of continual self-renewal to anticipate the world and situate their place in it, but sometimes their imaginations are limited by their experiences and habitual approaches toward life. By sharing a story with others, two or more imaginations can be engaged in relationship to create something new. Listeners provide a rich resource for analysis and viewpoints. Questions that involve a listener include:

- What does this story tell you about me?
- What messages do you take away from the story?
- What story of your own are you reminded of?

Finally, because narrative refiguration is a never-ending process of rereading the story, reflecting upon it, and moving the plot, the leadership story that is created will need to be re-created as time and circumstances progress and change. The next set of questions serves to continue the reframing process over time:

- Is my story still current or has it changed?
- Is my story moving me toward my preferred future?
- Do I wish to change my story? In what ways?

Summary

Leadership is about change, and change begins with a process of self-awareness that clarifies commitments and leads to action. The journey toward leadership is in part a reflective process of recognizing the values, assumptions, hopes, and fears that are carried in memory and anticipation and shape one's perspective on the world.

Leadership is also a social process. Often our deepest learning comes about through conversations with those who hold different worldviews. We can exchange stories with others and ask what our stories say to them. Through a play of conversation in which we mutually risk revealing and examining assumptions and biases, we can find new meaning in the world and imagine alternative futures together. This process requires us to tell our story with sincerity, to listen and respect others' perspectives, to seek common ground, and to be willing to revise assumptions.

Stories, like the practice of leadership, do not occur in isolation but in relationship. The circumstances that touch our lives may be different, but underlying them are human emotions we share. Stories speak to us at this level, creating connections and leading toward the possibility of shared commitments and action.

Note: All quotes attributed to Arn Chorn-Pond were recorded by the lead author during research conversations in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, August 2003.

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